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Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
RELIGIOWEST

Expert Religion: The Politics of Religious Difference in
an Age of Freedom and Terror

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd

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Abstract

Based on her recently published book, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion*, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd's paper is an attempt at disaggregating the category of religion. It distinguishes between forms of knowledge about religion (including constructs of religious extremism and religious freedom) authorized by experts (expert religion); religion as construed and authorized by governments and courts at home and abroad (official or governed religion); and the broader fields of spiritual practices, beliefs, and forms of belonging on the ground (lived or everyday religion) which are entangled with but not reducible to expert or official religion.

Keywords

Expert religion, official religion, lived religion, religious freedom, US foreign policy.

Introduction

In the fall of 2015 I received an email from a program officer in the State Department's U.S. Speaker Program in the Bureau of International Information Programs. The U.S. Embassy Niamey, in Niger, was planning a virtual program on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and the officer was looking for "a French speaking countering-violent extremism and/or religious freedom expert (who) would address a closed audience for 15-30 minutes, followed by extended question and answer session with the closed audience."¹ The expert would address the audience at the Embassy in an opening event in support of an upcoming "TechCamp" in January 2016. The IIP Virtual Speaker Request Form, attached to the email, described TechCamp as follows: "The goal of this program, and the event itself, is to start a dialogue about CVE [Countering Violent Extremism] issues in the Sahel region. Having direct knowledge of CVE and technology situations from TechCamp participants will help us better match subject matter experts and technologists to the needs of our participants, enabling us to host a far more impactful TechCamp event in January 2016. The main viewing group will be gathered at the American Center in Niamey, Niger. The MSRP themes are empowering civil-society groups, religious freedom and countering violent extremism."² The call for experts then described the audience for the event. "The audience of the main viewing session will be 20-30 religious leaders and young civil society leaders selected by Post and our TechCamp implementing partner, the National Youth Council of Niger. Audience members will be francophone Africans. Audience members will all come from demographics targeted by recruiters from extremist organizations. They will be from Niamey and the surrounding area, and will mostly be future participants in the January TechCamp. Feedback from the audience of this program will go directly to shaping the theme, wider audience, training topics, trainers and tech tools that will be presented at the January TechCamp." The attachment said the expert also might be invited to travel to Niamey as a trainer for TechCamp in early 2016.

What exactly is a "countering-violent extremism and/or religious freedom expert?" What are the qualifications to be or to become such an expert? What could the and/or in that sentence possibly signify? Are most experts in violent extremism also experts in religious freedom, and vice versa? And what exactly is an extremist organization? Is it any organization that opposes U.S. policy in the Sahel region? Or is it limited to those who support the use of violence as a means of expressing opposition? What if the U.S. government is using violence against them? More to the point, what forms of expert knowledge about religion, freedom, and extremism are being mobilized here, by whom, and to what ends? And what, if anything, does any of this have to do with religion?

The American foreign policy establishment has a long history of collaboration with scholars and experts across disciplines.³ This isn't new. In the context of the war on extremism, these partnerships are taking new forms. As suggested by the call for CVE/religious freedom experts, there is a special emphasis on expertise on religion and religious freedom. This essay examines the

¹ Email correspondence, October 23, 2015.

² The email did not explain the abbreviation MSRP.

³ Writing in *Al-Ahram* in 2002, Edward Said famously criticized the terms and consequences of the U.S. government's co-optation of American academics during the Cold War. "When the intellectuals of the most powerful country in the history of the world align themselves so flagrantly with that power, pressing that power's case instead of urging restraint, reflection, genuine communication and understanding, we are back to the bad old days of the intellectual war against communism, which we now know brought far too many compromises, collaborations and fabrications on the part of intellectuals and artists who should have played an altogether different role. Subsidised and underwritten by the government (the CIA especially, which went as far as providing for the subvention of magazines like *Encounter*, underwrote scholarly research, travel and concerts as well as artistic exhibitions), those militantly unreflective and uncritical intellectuals and artists in the 1950s and 1960s brought to the whole notion of intellectual honesty and complicity a new and disastrous dimension. For along with that effort went also the domestic campaign to stifle debate, intimidate critics, and restrict thought. For many Americans, like myself, this is a shameful episode in our history, and we must be on our guard against and resist its return." Edward Said, *Al-Ahram Weekly* online 2/28-3/6/02, issue no. 575.

intersection between religion and global governance in an age of freedom and terror. How should we think about religion and politics in the context of the flourishing state-sponsored international CVE/religious freedom agenda?

My book, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion*, addresses this question by disaggregating the category of religion.⁴ It distinguishes between forms of knowledge about religion (including constructs of religious extremism and religious freedom) authorized by experts (what I call *expert religion*); religion as construed and authorized by governments and courts at home and abroad (what I call *official or governed religion*); and the broader fields of spiritual practices, beliefs, and forms of belonging on the ground (which I call *lived or everyday religion*) which are entangled with but not reducible to expert or official religion. Disaggregating and de-essentializing religion allows for a rather different reading of the CVE/religious freedom agenda as a form of extraterritorial establishment. This programming enables the political and religious empowerment of U.S.-friendly “religions” and their representatives and spokespersons. Particular leaders are authorized to speak on behalf of the American-sanctioned religious constituencies and citizenries that populate an emerging faith-based global landscape. Through these efforts, the U.S. government empowers these authorized religions and religious leaders while marginalizing others, both politically *and* religiously.

Expert religion, lived religion, official religion

To see these dynamics requires disaggregating the category of religion and moving beyond narratives of secularism as separation. *Beyond Religious Freedom* disaggregates religion into three categories: expert religion, governed religion, and lived religion. How do these heuristics help us understand the politics of the CVE/religious freedom agenda? How can we as scholars and analysts describe the broader context that makes possible an email from State seeking a CVE/religious freedom expert?

The concept of *expert religion* is helpful. Expert religion is religion as construed by those who generate policy-relevant knowledge about religion, including scholars, policy experts, and government officials. Today in Europe and North America a particular framework dominates expert religious discourse: the “two faces of faith.” The two faces is shorthand for a pair of complementary assumptions that structure most public policy and many scholarly discussions on the subject of contemporary religion and public international life. The first face is the agenda of reassurance, a naïve celebration of religion as the source of morality, community, and freedom. The second face is the agenda of surveillance, which positions religion as a danger to be reformed and policed, denigrates it as the root of global instability and insecurity. These constructions of religion/politics generate real world sequelae: in the first instance, governmental support for religious “authorities,” self-identified and/or created by religious experts; in the second, the politics of national and global religious surveillance, discipline, and reform. This powerful discourse structures the contemporary global governance of religious diversity and drives the CVE/religious freedom agenda. Religion appears simultaneously as an aspect of social difference that is a potential problem—a cause of violence and discord—and its own solution insofar as interfaith cooperation can be institutionalized, extremists marginalized, and religion’s benevolent tendencies harnessed by the authorities for the public good. If governments and other stakeholders study and shape religion effectively, if they properly engage religious actors to cultivate toleration and curb extremism, then religion will contribute to international peace and security, economic growth, and human flourishing, and its violent potential will diminish. This expert consensus is the background condition for the email invitation from State and the broader context that generated it.

The concept of governed or official religion is also helpful. This is religion as construed for the purposes of law and governance by those in positions of political and religious authority, such as the

⁴ Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). Parts of this essay draw on the introductory chapter of the book.

US government. This includes not only states, often through the law, foreign policy, and public administration, but also other authorities such as supranational courts, governing entities such as the European Union, and international and nongovernmental organizations. It also includes churches and other religious organizations and hierarchies at all levels. Governed religion is informed by and deeply entangled with expert religion. Today in the international field, governed religion is strongly influenced by the two faces framework, in which religion is construed as both a governance problem and as its own solution. To generate particular forms of governed religion that conform to U.S. interests in the Sahel is the immediate objective of US Embassy Niamey's CVE/religious freedom programming.

Governed and expert religions do not, however, exhaust the religious field. This is important, and it is where lived or everyday religion enters the picture. This is religion as practiced by ordinary individuals and groups as they interact with a variety of religious authorities, rituals, texts, and institutions and seek to navigate and make sense of their lives, connections with others, and place in the world. It is a diverse field of activity, relations, investments, belief, and practices that may or may not be captured in the set of human goings-on that are identified as religion for the purposes of generating expert knowledge or meeting the aims and objective of governance. Everyday or lived religion may be indifferent, opposed, supportive or inassimilable to the terms of both official and expert religion.

In his recent book *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, James Scott disaggregates modern politics in ways that parallel my attempt to destabilize the modern category of religion. Paralleling the distinction between expert/official and lived religion, Scott describes the past three centuries of the rise of the modern state as the triumph of "standardized, official landscapes of control and appropriation" over "vernacular order."⁵ Like Scott's official and vernacular politics, expert, official, and lived religion are all mixed up with each other, and also with institutional religion. They cannot be disentangled. The distinctions between these categories are always, to an extent, arbitrary and porous, themselves the product of law and governance. My intention, then, is neither to romanticize lived religion as prior to structures and relations of power nor to identify "authentic" forms of it. There is no pure religion that stands independent of elite, orthodox, or legal religion. These heuristics are useful not because they have sharp boundaries but because they allow us to understand more fully the intertwined religious and political dynamics that shape the worlds we inhabit. They help us see a bigger picture by drawing attention to forms of sociality and religiosity that might otherwise escape our field of vision. It allows us to see ways of being and belonging—what we might call small "r" religion—that exist partially outside and, at times, in tension with big "R" Religion—the Religion protected in constitutions, by governments, and in international legal instruments.⁶ The former tends to fall beyond the peripheral vision of scholars of international law and politics who, when they look for religion, more often than not look for religious leaders and institutions, recognizable texts and orthodoxies, and authorities with long robes and ornate headgear. These authorities matter, but they do not exhaust the field.

Opening the study of religion and global politics to this broader field generates new questions about religion and governance. It invites scholars and others to explore the gaps between *specific* constructs of religion, religious freedom or violent extremism as construed by the State Department, the Department of Defense, governing bodies of the EU or various other institutions, and a series of broader fields of ordinary practice, belonging and belief. The latter is often made up of multiple,

⁵ James C. Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 35.

⁶ "Human history supports the idea that religion, small 'r' religion, is a nearly ubiquitous and perhaps necessary part of human culture. Big 'R' Religion, on the other hand, the Religion that is protected in constitutions and human rights law under liberal political theory, is not. Big 'R' Religion is a modern invention, an invention designed to separate good religion from bad religion, orthodoxy from heresy." Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, "The Impossibility of Religious Freedom," *The Immanent Frame* (July 8, 2014). <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2014/07/08/impossibility-of-religious-freedom/>

dissenting, politically disfavored, unorthodox or minor traditions. There is a disjuncture between powerful constructs of religious governance—such as religious freedom and anti-extremism—defined by experts and enforced by states and other international authorities, and the variable and messy spiritual worlds of the individuals and communities they aspire to govern, reform, or redeem. And yet, in virtually all circumstances government advocacy for “religious freedom” and the political and religious empowerment of moderate religious leaders are understood as attempts to protect and engage pre-existing “religious” individuals and communities. But there are no such “religions” that exist ontologically prior to these processes of political and legal recognition. The religion that is protected in such efforts is the religion favored by those in positions of power. Sympathetic religions and religious leaders are empowered both politically and religiously through these processes. It is in this sense that we might speak of a form of establishment.

The notion of secularism as separation falls apart in this context. As Matthew Scherer shows in his book, *Beyond Church and State: Democracy, Secularism, and Conversion*, the transformative processes that produced the notion of secularism as separation did not in fact separate religion and politics along a clear line of distinction, but rather re-determined the nature of both politics and religion simultaneously.⁷ Modern secularism, therefore, must be seen “not simply to have emerged from a religious past with which it has broken but instead as both divided from a religious past and yet also locked in continuous and shifting patterns of interrelation with religion in the present.”⁸ And yet despite the evident complexities of these interrelations, and the repeated destabilization of stable and ahistorical notions of religious and secular across the disciplines in recent years,⁹ so many contemporary governmental efforts naïvely rely on a stable rendering of the secular-religious binary to “solve” policy challenges—both those associated with so-called religious sources of violence, and those that require the alleged irenic qualities of religion as a source of morality and freedom. This is the preeminent narrative guiding scholars and practitioners faced with questions at the intersection of contemporary religion and global affairs, including those who understand themselves to be working on CVE/religious freedom.

The policy prescription that emerges from this expert consensus is that “good” religion should be restored to international relations, while “bad” religion should be reformed or eradicated through a series of public-private partnerships. This narrative has largely displaced the secularization thesis, to the extent that the latter is understood as referring to the privatization, marginalization, or disappearance of religion in modernity. Both tendencies however could be described as secularist, in that both are deeply concerned with religion as an object of politics.¹⁰ As Scherer put it in a recent discussion of the politics of religious freedom in the Hosanna-Tabor and Hobby Lobby US Supreme Court decisions, “it is a distinctly secular fiction that here authorizes the autonomy of religion.”¹¹ The way we talk about religion and global politics today—what I call in the book the new global politics of religion—is the result of a shift in the center of gravity of public and academic discourse away from an understanding of religion as private, internal and largely irrelevant to global governance, and toward a new frame, and new forms of politics, in which religion is seen as a public good, agent of transformation, and source of both freedom and violence.

⁷ Matthew Scherer, *Beyond Church and State: Democracy, Secularism, and Conversion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 76.

⁸ Scherer, *Beyond Church and State*, 63.

⁹ Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Hussein Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

¹¹ Matthew Scherer, “The New Religious Freedom: Secular Fictions and Church Autonomy,” *Politics and Religion* 8 (2015): 557.

How the CVE/religious freedom agenda shapes both religion and politics

Over the past several decades, the U.S. government, its allies, and their proxies have rallied around the notion that legal guarantees to ensure the flourishing of free religion/countering violent extremism are required to emancipate societies from inter-communal strife, economic deprivation, terrorism, gender inequality and other social ills. It is widely believed that moderate religion, governed correctly, will push back and triumph over its archaic and extremist rivals. The right kind of religion, recognized and engaged by states and other public authorities, has emancipatory potential. It catalyzes democratization and takes the wind out of the sails of extremist movements. Leaders describe the cultivation of tolerant religion as a key ingredient in addressing the ills that plague global collective life.¹² Individuals and communities are understood as in need of varying degrees of socio-religious engineering. Reformers are sent out to cultivate the conditions in which secular states and their religious subjects become tolerant, believing or nonbelieving consumers of free religion, and practitioners of faith-based solutions. States marshal resources, gather information, and train bureaucrats on how to achieve these objectives.

This current wave of international religion programming is a combination of expert and official religion of a very particular kind which is, at least in part, a product of the “war on terror.” Recent years have seen the rise of an insatiable appetite for CVE/religious freedom experts. Experts have emerged to meet the demand. Academic journals are overrun with studies of religion. Analyses of the effects of religious actors and belief systems on political outcomes are ubiquitous. Professional associations have sections on religion and...every imaginable field of study. Foundations and think tanks rush to meet the demand for knowledge about religion in relation to every conceivable domain of human activity. Solutions for anxious policy makers are sought and found. The security industry, environmentalists, and rule of law consultants search for ways to bring religion in. In these accounts, religion appears as normative, singular, and prior to other affiliations and forms of sociality. There are things in the world called “religions” that interact with each other. Religions are unproblematic social facts comprised of bounded entities and faith communities to be studied, engaged, and reformed.

In practice, this narrative shapes both religion and politics in at least three ways. First, when religion is conceived as a plausible explanation and a cause of political behavior, it sets the stage for—and may be seen to require—political interventions shape it, to tap into its benevolent powers and tame its rough and subversive edges. Public interventions to shape religion in particular ways are normalized. Hence the CVE/religious freedom agenda.

Second, to declare or presume religion as the cause of conflict, as is implied in the CVE/religious freedom agenda, distorts complex questions of causation and obscures the broader historical and political contexts in which discrimination and violence arise. An example is the discussion surrounding the rise of the Islamic state (ISIL), in which Islam is often named as the cause of the violence. As Anver Emon explains, however, the moral panic surrounding ISIS is arising out of a context in which the “Islamic” is being rendered as an ideology to respond to a broad history of political, economic, and social frustration and dispossession: “ISIS is as much Islamic as it is a product of broken promises at the end of the British and French mandates; ISIS is as much Islamic as it is a product of the American interventions in Iraq; ISIS’s brutality is as Islamic as the Ku Klux Klan’s lynching of Black Americans was Christian, both Islam and Christianity having been used to justify violent brutality. To baldly pose these claims is to reveal the parochialisms that frame debates on Islam and Muslims, that inform certain politics of belonging and difference (read, Fox News), and that bolster the state policies that flow therefrom (e.g. Shari’a legislative bans).”¹³ The moral panic over

¹² For example see John Kerry, “Religion and Diplomacy,” *America: The National Catholic Review* (September 14, 2015). <http://americamagazine.org/issue/religion-and-diplomacy>

¹³ Anver Emon, “IS ISIS Islamic? Why it Matters for the Study of Islam.” *The Immanent Frame*, (March 27, 2015). <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2015/03/27/is-isis-islamic-why-it-matters-for-the-study-of-islam/>

Islam occludes a more diverse series of contributing factors that have led us to this place, artificially turning into a zero-sum game whether Islam is or is not tolerant, or does or does not condone violence. Violence and social tensions with multiple contributing factors—in the Middle East and beyond—are thereby depoliticized, their causes distorted or explained away through reference to intractable religious difference.

Third, expert and official religion actively shape lived religion. When the authorities approach world religions as entities with agency subject to various forms of public oversight and governance, these entities begin to conform to those presumptions. There is a backflow effect of construing religion as a stable object of law and governance, as particular forms of religious community and agency are realized and strengthened. Protecting individuals, communities and traditions *as* religions reshapes both religious and political fields in very specific ways.¹⁴ In the current global political and religious climate, individuals and groups are being compelled to represent themselves and their practices as recognizably “religious” in order to gain access to aid, asylum, legal protection, and other social goods. Those who cannot or choose not to represent themselves in this way are rendered illegible or unintelligible under such a regime. Given legal incentives to identify oneself, and others, in a recognizably religious register, faith communities begin to take shape as corporate bodies on the international public stage, able to reap the social and material benefits of being classified by states and international legal authorities as religions, faith communities, or (persecuted) religionists. We see these dynamics today in claims for asylum in Germany in the context of the refugee crisis. Because asylum claims from Pakistani Christians carry more weight legally and politically in Germany, there has been a rise in conversions to Christianity among asylum-seekers.¹⁵ Both political and religious fields are reshaped and transformed in the process. The CVE/religious freedom agenda is a driver of these transformations.

International theorists need to understand the effects on both religion *and* politics of expert and official attempts to single out religion as a stable foundation from which to formulate foreign policy, write constitutions, make asylum decisions, and conduct rights advocacy. Narratives taking “religion” as an object of intervention and platform for policy implementation should be met with skepticism. Government-sponsored CVE/religious freedom efforts always single out *specific* forms of religion, *specific* religious leaders, and *particular* religious traditions from a more expansive field, whether for engagement, reform or eradication. Moreover, the religion that is privileged, treated, or condemned through these efforts does not necessarily align with the disparate, improvised and syncretic forms of ordinary religious belonging and practice that characterize many modern lives.

One might ask, so what does that “lived” religious field look like? Take the example of Afro-Brazilian practices. As Dom Phillips reports in *The Washington Post*, aspects of both Candomblé and Umbanda have long been part of Brazilian culture —millions of Brazilians offer flowers to the sea goddess Yemanjá, who is associated with the Virgin Mary, on New Year’s Eve and on February 2. Candomblé’s sister religion, Umbanda, combines Candomblé with Catholic traditions and saints. As Phillips wrote, “on a recent Sunday in São Gonçalo, a poor suburb near Rio, an Umbanda ceremony featured the drumming and incorporations seen in Candomblé, but worshipers also said Catholic prayers.”¹⁶ Writing in *Boston Review*, Laura Premack describes this combination as “spiritual bricolage.” As she explains, “it is entirely unsurprising to meet a Brazilian who calls herself Catholic,

¹⁴ “Even the individuals, communities, and traditions that are ‘protected’ are subject to pressures that reshape them as they are incorporated as ‘religious’ under the law.” Scherer, “New Religious Freedom,” 552.

¹⁵ Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, “For Some Muslim Asylum-Seekers in Germany, Christianity Beckons,” National Public Radio (November 11, 2015), <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/11/09/454670739/for-some-muslim-asylum-seekers-in-germany-christianity-beckons>

¹⁶ Dom Phillips, “Afro-Brazilian Religions Struggle against Evangelical Hostility,” *The Washington Post* (February 6, 2015), https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/afro-brazilian-religions-struggle-against-evangelical-hostility/2015/02/05/b6a30c6e-aaf9-11e4-8876-460b1144cbc1_story.html

belonged to an evangelical youth group as a teenager, was married by a priest, attends a local Methodist church, reads Spiritist books, draws mandalas to relax, and consults an Umbanda priest for advice.”¹⁷

This is the religion of much of the world. Whether in Brazil, the United States, Japan, or Albania, it is often difficult to classify individuals as believers or nonbelievers in a single and stable religious tradition. Dissidents, doubters, those who practice multiple traditions, nonorthodox versions of protected traditions, or no (recognizable) tradition at all, struggle for representation on a faith-based global landscape that privileges strongly “formatted” U.S. and European-friendly religions and their appointed representatives.

Conclusion

Contemporary CVE/religious freedom programs are modern political and legal strategies for controlling the political and religious lives of foreign subjects. These initiatives shape and tailor both individual and collective lives. Professional transnational religion experts and governors are hard at work to meet the global demand for tolerant religious subjects who enjoy “freedom” under law and shun whatever the authorities define as political/religious extremism. This explains why CVE/religious freedom can be represented as a single field of expertise: by definition, shunning whatever the authorities define as “extremism” is understood as a means of achieving “religious freedom.”

Disaggregating religion tells a different story. In privileging whatever and whomever the authorities define as moderate religion and tolerant religious leaders, such programs require these authorities to determine what counts as religion and to distinguish between moderate and immoderate, legal and illegal, and tolerable and intolerable forms of it. Not only does this exclude “non-religious,” dissenting and unorthodox traditions, it also risks exacerbating the tensions these projects are designed to mitigate by hardening more fluid lines of difference between groups, fomenting intra-communal conflict, and inserting an international dimension into what were once local matters. My colleagues in the *Politics of Religious* project have documented these dynamics in contexts around the world, including post-Soviet Central Asia, India, Malaysia, South Sudan and Egypt.¹⁸

Government-sponsored CVE/religious freedom programs construe and create “religious” groups as both political actors *and* faith communities. Religious engagement officers in Brussels or Washington breathe a sigh of relief: “finally, here are the partners we’ve been waiting for.” But there is no single “religion” or set of religions waiting offstage in the margins of “secular” public life to be engaged or reformed. That is a myth. That which falls under the heading of religion is a contested and evolving mash-up of shifting and diverse families of beliefs, institutional forms, and fields of practice and experience. State-sponsored religious outreach forcibly distills this complex field into something governable. It squeezes a diverse set of human goings-on into the mold of whatever the authorities define as tolerant religions that merit political engagement. That religion is given a seat at the table, and others are not. This creates a divide between officially favored religion and the rest of world’s religion—including practices that many would consider sacred but that don’t qualify as a religion, and those associated with political and/or religious opponents or dissidents. Unofficial, unsanctioned, unorthodox practices, traditions, encounters with the gods are crowded out. All religions may be equal, but some are always more equal than others.

¹⁷ Laura Premack, “Dead Man Talking: Brazil’s Spiritists Redefine Religion,” *Boston Review* (April 13, 2015). http://bostonreview.net/world/laura-premack-dead-man-talking-brazil-spiritism?utm_content=13969544&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter

¹⁸ Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Saba Mahmood and Peter G. Danchin, eds. *Politics of Religious Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Seen this way, the assumption that the top-down legalization of freedom of religion and state-sponsored engagement with faith communities through CVE and related programming will emancipate society from persecution and discrimination appears to be deeply flawed. The opposite may be the case. Such efforts serve to exacerbate social tensions by making religious difference a matter of law and public policy, exaggerating the divide between the religion of those in power and those without it. And yet today claims for justice articulated in the languages of religious freedom and religious moderation resonate loudly in the corridors of power. The new global politics of religion rewards those who speak this language. It compels individuals and groups with multiple and intersecting identities and histories to register and constitute themselves publically and politically as religious, tolerant, freedom loving faith communities. In this setting, these individuals and groups have every incentive to demand religious rights and freedoms. And they do. When states and other authorities posit discrete religious identities and communities as defining features on the global political landscape, it lends authority and authenticity to groups designated as religions. Agency and community are assumed to conform with, and are conferred on, these entities. Boundaries between religions, and between religion and non-religion, are naturalized and normalized.¹⁹ New corporate forms of religious agency and authority take shape, and defend their ground. Old hierarchies are reasserted and re-figured. At the same time, those who cannot or choose not to speak in a recognizably religious register go unheard. This includes claimants for justice, equality and dignity that cannot or choose not to speak as religionists. It also includes scholars and analysts who prefer to steer clear of the CVE/religious freedom industry and its unceasing demand for experts.

It is not difficult to picture “TechCamp” at US Embassy Niamey, with a francophone American expert on religious freedom/countering violent extremism counseling local citizens from “demographics targeted by recruiters from extremist organizations” on how to be tolerant, free, and pro-American. At best, such programming is a distraction from serious efforts to address the complex and deeply intersected causes of violence and discrimination through local initiatives that support education, economic opportunity, and just governance. At worst, it risks politicizing religious difference and fomenting the very radicalization it is intended to prevent. I deleted the email from State.

¹⁹ “For a variety of reasons—a new generation coming of age, the rising attention to worldwide political Islam, and the need for a new enemy post-Soviet Union—beginning the late 1980s, Muslims in France, Britain, and elsewhere were increasingly defined by their religion. *They reacted by demanding religious rights.*” John Bowen, “Forum: France after Charlie Hebdo,” *Boston Review* (March 3, 2015, emphasis added). <http://bostonreview.net/forum/john-bowen-france-after-charlie-hebdo>

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